

**Alvan Adams had it all—
ability, brains, adoration,
even his own “army”—
and now finally, his degree.**

ALWAYS A WINNER

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Alvan Adams figured the pressurized days of beating the clock with game-winning shots were behind him when he retired from the NBA’s Phoenix Suns in 1988. But last summer, a phone call from the University of Oklahoma changed all that.

A brief conversation with OU Senior Academic Counselor Mary Anne Hempe left Adams staring at what amounted to another last-second shot. This time, however, the target for the one-time Sooner basketball great was his college degree.

“Alvan was on an older degree program that was getting ready to expire. But we figured he could finish it if he really buckled down,” says Hempe of the liberal arts degree in letters Adams had been pursuing since 1993.

“I always enjoyed school, and I’d wanted to finish my degree for quite a while—there just never seemed to be enough time,” said the 43-year-old Adams, who played at OU from 1972-75. “I thought about finishing at Arizona State, and I took some courses there, but OU has always meant a lot to me. It’s such a great place, and it’s where I wanted to finish.”

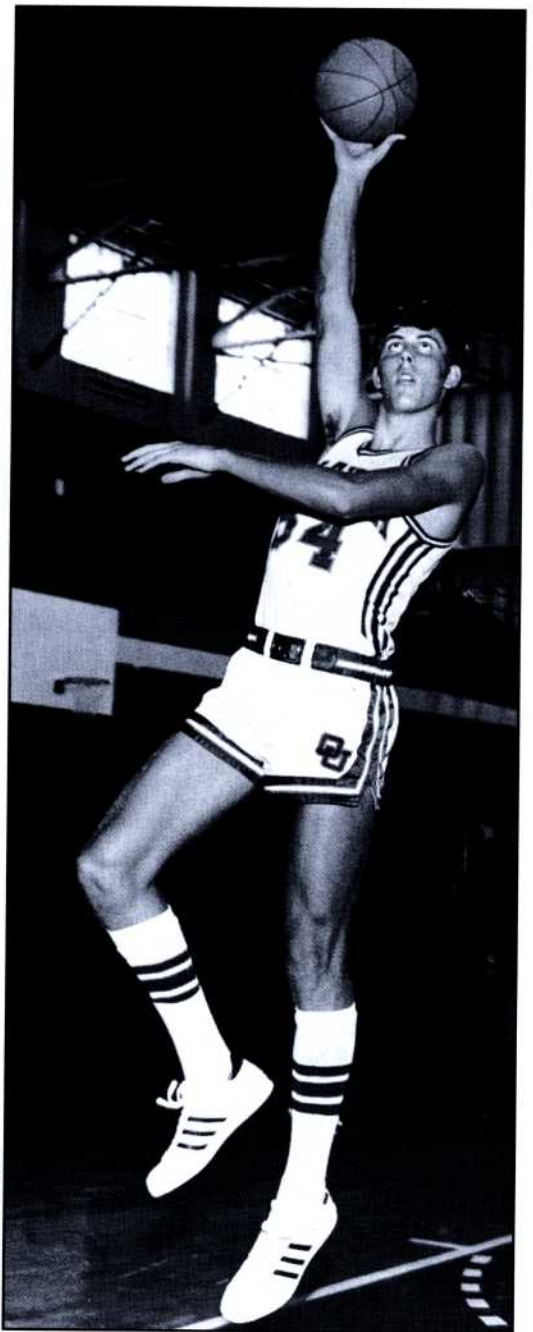
In order to graduate where he had enjoyed so many great moments on the basketball court, Adams needed to complete 15 hours—including three hours of intermediate ancient foreign language—in a little under 11 months. The countdown began when he took an OU extension course at Santa Fe, New Mexico, last summer and then followed with six hours of upper division electives at ASU in the fall.

“That’s a very rigorous program to begin with and to do it like this, through independent studies and without having access to the campus, is almost impossible. But Alvan was very diligent about it,” said Hempe.

Adams’ biggest concern was the intermediate Latin portion of his OU independent study program this spring.

“I’d had two years of Latin in high school, but that was so long ago. I felt a little like the guy shooting the half-court shot at an NBA game; it was tough,” explains Adams, who eventually completed his degree in May by translating the works of Cicero.

In the end, Adams graduated with distinction as a member of Phi Beta Kappa, a national honorary fraternity for academic excellence.



OU Sports Information

SWISH.

"It was obviously a long time coming—but it's special. I'd like to thank Mary Anne, because she was a great help," notes Adams. "It also feels good because most everything I've ever done has been team-oriented, but this was definitely an individual pursuit."

Adams will cherish this accomplishment as much as all of his jump shots, lay-ups and dunks combined. Completing the task at OU makes it all the more special.



Ironically, Adams had a similar decision to make some 25 years ago.

Few will ever know just how close Adams came to wearing UCLA's powder blue and gold or having a Vanderbilt logo stitched to the back of his college warm-up. And having been born in Lawrence, Kansas, why had Adams passed on his obvious birthright and the chance to play for one of college basketball's traditional powerhouses at KU?

Maybe if John Wooden had pushed a little harder? Or if Jayhawk coach Ted Owens had been a bit more convincing?

Many variables figured into Adams' selection of a major college basketball program in 1972, but none factored more heavily than the people involved. Ultimately, the sincere hospitality and friendly atmosphere persuaded the 6-foot-9 Putnam City prep star and class valedictorian to make the University of Oklahoma his final choice.

The rest, as they say, is history.

That particular chapter of OU history was revived in February 1998 when school officials retired Adams' jersey, thus uniting him with fellow basketball great Wayman Tisdale as the only two Sooner athletes ever to be so honored.

"Alvan Adams is one of the people who made it 'cool' to come here and play basketball," offers current OU coach Kelvin Sampson. "Basketball was almost considered a minor sport until Alvan Adams arrived in Norman. This program owes him a lot."

It is a debt that almost never materialized.

"It came down to OU, Kansas, UCLA and Vanderbilt, and they were all great schools," says Adams, rethinking the defining moment that would change his life forever. "But the deciding factor was the people I was going to be around over the next four years. Everyone at Oklahoma was so great, I knew that's where I needed to be."

John MacLeod, who coached the Sooners from 1967-73, may have been the most influential person in Adams' decision. During the lengthy recruiting process that included visits from athletic director Wade Walker and Heisman Trophy winner Steve Owens, the duo developed a solid relationship that transcended the game of basketball and has lasted a lifetime.

"Coach MacLeod was one of the main reasons I picked OU. Not only did I feel he was a good coach, but I respected the way he treated his players and the people around him," notes Adams, who was the Oklahoma Player of the Year as a high school senior.

Coaxing Adams into signing at OU was considered a huge step in MacLeod's master plan. The previous four campaigns had been devoted to resurrecting a program that had withered into a perennial loser during the dozen years prior to his arrival. While players like Don Sidle, Garfield Heard and Clifford Ray had started the rebuilding process, Adams was hailed as the "savior."

That type of pressure might have been too much for most 18-year-olds, but Adams thrived on it. In his very first game as a Sooner, the freshman began living up to his phenom hype with 34 points and a school record 28 rebounds.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE
DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at
call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell
Memorial Library.

Photo: David

A nostalgic Alvan Adams waves to a cheering crowd in Lloyd Noble Center, often called the "House that Alvan Built"—but in which he never played. To his right are daughter Emily and son Justin.

A LEGEND WAS BORN.

That was only the beginning of a marvelous collegiate career that eventually would rank Adams as arguably the best basketball player in OU history.

"Gar Heard was tremendous and so was Wayman, but Alvan was such a special player," says MacLeod, now the head coach at Notre Dame. "Oklahoma basketball took on a different perspective when we got Alvan. Besides his scoring and rebounding, he was quick, he could run, and he was a tremendous passer.

"Alvan was a very focused young man, and he made everyone around him that much better. You are very, very fortunate as a coach if you have one player like Alvan. I was fortunate."

Adams averaged over 22 points and 13 rebounds while leading the Sooners to an 18-8 record his freshman season. Despite the unexpected departure of MacLeod, who could not resist an offer to coach the Phoenix Suns of the Na-

tional Basketball Association, Adams continued to flourish during each of the next two seasons.

His well-documented success helped re-establish a solid fan base during a time when OU football was not only king of the campus but the talk of an entire sports-minded country.

"Alvan definitely generated a lot of fan interest when he arrived. We didn't have the radio talk shows or televised games every night, but he brought a lot of excitement to Sooner basketball," said Mike McCurdy, who roomed with Adams on the road for two seasons at OU. "Alvan was such a well-rounded player, very athletic for a big man. And from day one, his composure was equally impressive.

"He never sought all the attention he was getting, and he never let success get to him. He was a down-to-earth guy who handled all that stuff very well."

At the same time he was establishing himself on the hardwood, Adams began working on a degree in math. But while his numbers were adding up fast, his plans would eventually change.



Good things happened to Adams from the moment he arrived on campus in Norman. And that good fortune seemed to rub off on the OU basketball program.

With his record-setting Sooner debut just a few months away, Adams met Houston freshman Sara Dennstedt in August 1972. Their friendship grew into love, and, despite her non-sports background, she became Adams' biggest supporter over the next three years.

"We were introduced by a mutual friend, and we hit it off right away," recalls Sara, who admits she was not fully aware of just how "famous" her new beau was in the beginning. "We got along great, but he was a little more interested in basketball at that point. And who could blame him? When you're that age, you don't see a lot of the things swirling around you, but I know there was a lot of pressure.

"Yet, he always handled it so well. Alvan kept everything in perspective. He had a very healthy way of keeping things in balance."

That balance included a diligent work ethic on the basketball court and in the classroom. His juggling act included dealing with tons of interview requests from the media and his first appearance in *Sports Illustrated*.

There were few quiet moments.

The spotlight grew even brighter, and the pressure intensified once the '72-73 season got under way. Fans hungry for a title contender filed into the venerable OU Field House to watch

"He never sought all the attention he was getting, and he never let success get to him. He was a down-to-earth guy who handled all that stuff very well."

the new kid work his magic. A group of high school and college students, calling itself "Alvan's Army," complete with combat helmets and banners bearing their hero's name, formed a cheering section that kept the volume turned up at every home game.

Night in and night out, Adams delivered by demonstrating the poise and talent that would earn him the Big Eight Freshman of the Year Award and eventually Big Eight Player of the Year and All-American honors down the road.

"My first year at OU led to a lot of great things for me. I met my wife, and I was able to establish myself at that level (of basketball) pretty quickly," said Adams. "I knew expectations were high, and I had my own expectations. I dealt with those

things like anybody else would."

Although a broken wrist ended Adams' first season with five games remaining, the Sooners still finished 18-8 overall and 9-5 in the Big Eight, good enough for third place. The Soonercenter, who averaged 22.1 points and 13.2 rebounds, was an All-Conference selection.



Adams' freshman season was a mere tune-up for what would be a memorable collegiate career, albeit a career marked by three coaching changes, including one due to the tragic death of Lester Lane just weeks prior to the start of Adams' sophomore season. Lane suffered a fatal heart attack while playing basketball in the Field House on September 6, 1973.

"I have a lot of special memories from my time at OU, but that part of my stay was tough," admits Adams. "The whole team had a lot of adjusting to do in a short period of time. John left, and I barely got a chance to know Coach Lane before he passed away. Coach (Joe) Ramsey was our third coach within just a few months, so it was not an ideal situation."

Ramsey, who had served as an assistant for MacLeod, took the reigns after Lane's death. The program had to be pieced together in just six short weeks. Making things more hectic was the fact NBA scouts began lining up to get a closer look at Adams before his sophomore season had even tipped off.

But OU's new superstar never wavered.

Despite drawing double- and triple-team defensive coverage much of the season, Adams posted All-American numbers with a 21.2 scoring average and 12.1 boards a game. With the help of players like McCurdy, Bob Pritchard and Tom Holland, he paced the Sooners to another successful 18-8 season and third place in the conference.

The pressure to turn pro was undeniable. Rumors circulated of lucrative contract offers and tough-to-turn-down deals, but Adams opted to stay at OU and continue a pre-med education.

"I felt we had a good team coming back at OU, and I didn't see any real guarantees in the NBA at that point. So, I felt that was the best decision I could make at the time," says Adams.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO
COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number
LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

Lisa Hall

Mementos of the glorious Sooner basketball career of Alvan Adams, right, are enshrined in a wall-of-honor exhibit on Lloyd Noble Center's upper concourse. From left are Adams' wife, Sara, and children, Justin and Emily.

It was definitely the right decision for Sooner fans who set attendance records upon his return as a junior All-American.

The third game of the 1974-75 season pitted OU against a sixth-ranked South Carolina squad that featured future NBA stars Alex English and Mike Dunleavy. Fans packed the Field House aisles to see the Sooners upset the Gamecocks 90-84 behind Adams' 20-point, nine-rebound performance.

But while Adams again earned Big Eight Player of the Year honors by turning in his best season as a Sooner, averaging 26.6 points and 13.3 rebounds per game, a couple of tough overall recruiting years left OU's program on less-than-stable ground. The Sooners finished 13-13, another coaching change was on the horizon, and the immediate future was a bit cloudy.

When the NBA came calling again, the decision was much harder.

MacLeod re-entered the picture, only this time he was representing the Phoenix Suns, who assured Adams they would make him their No. 1 pick and the fourth selection overall in the '75 NBA draft.

"The fact I had a chance to break into the NBA with a coach I was already familiar with was very important. I talked with my (OU) teammates, and they agreed it was time for me to go. It was a tough decision, but those were the things I based it on," explains Adams. "I didn't know much about Phoenix other than it was a warm-weather city. They had some good players coming back, and it seemed like a good opportunity for me."

Adams filed for hardship and entered his name in the draft pool. Phoenix followed through on its promise and quickly became one of the best teams in the NBA once their new star was aboard. His sensational "Rookie

of the Year" performance helped lead the Suns to the NBA finals where they lost to Boston in six games.

The perfect marriage of player and team saw Adams spend 13 years in Phoenix before retiring in 1988 as the Suns' all-time leading scorer. Today, Adams still works in the Suns organization as the vice president and assistant general manager of the America West Arena, the team's multi-million-dollar home.

"I've loved Phoenix from the day we got here, and I still do. Funny how things have a way of working out—and in this instance, it's worked out pretty well," said Adams, who lives in the Phoenix area with Sara and their children, Justin, 17, and Emily, 15.



Last fall, Sampson contacted Adams about plans to host a retirement ceremony for his No. 33 jersey during the Sooners' 1997-98 season. Although he had returned to Norman only a handful of times since his departure in 1975, Adams was thrilled to participate.

The trip "home" was like a nostalgic voyage that brought back old friends and great memories.

"It really did bring back all the memories of what a special time that was for me. It was a beautiful ceremony, and it's such a honor to be put in Wayman's company like that," says Adams. "We felt really spoiled the way they treated us. I think my kids even looked at me a little differently. They barely remember me playing, but this put it in a new light."

The morning before the ceremony, Adams relived some of his great Sooner moments when he visited the old Field House with his daughter.

"It's a great old building; just walking through the front doors again was a neat experience," he says. "The Field House was so small, and the fans made it pretty tough on the other teams. I pointed to where Alvan's Army sat, and we explored all of the little quirks and the nooks and crannies. It was a great trip back.

"I think it's wonderful Coach Sampson has created this link with all the generations of OU basketball. It's important to remember the past as you head into the future."